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# Last Lessons in Beekeeping

Joe Dwyer

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## Last Lessons in Beekeeping · Joe Dwyer

### I

I HAD NO FATHER—like the drone, *Apis mellifera*, who through a genetic contortion, a strange and devastating logic, has no father. Parthenogenesis: “reproduction without intervention,” as explicitly documented in Dadant’s *The Hive and the Honeybee*. The queen lays either fertilized or unfertilized eggs, “at pleasure,” her choice: the fertilized egg, the worker, emerges from her cell to begin a succession of roles: nurse, attendant, guard, forager; the drone emanates from an unfertilized egg, and from the moment he eats through the capping, lives contentedly off the ample output of his ambitious, neurotic sisters until the end of the season when, his mating skills redundant, the stores of honey now a limited commodity, he has his wings ripped off and is dumped at the front of the hive to die. I kept a hive in our back yard and had witnessed the grisly event. By spring, the handful of husks had softened into the spaded ground.

The father I did not have lived a mile away from us near Girard on Lead Avenue, a three-lane one-way thoroughfare—this was in Albuquerque, 1969—in an efficiency apartment with a stall shower and a two-step back porch: no yard. My mother had asked him to move out the September before, just after my sister, thirteen, and I, soon twelve, started school. She explained that he wasn’t a bad father, in the sense that bad fathers beat their wives and kids, came home falling-down drunk, lied, embezzled, caroused. She wanted to make this clear. He wasn’t a bad father: he was no father: he had to move out. What made him no father was that he drank—as I have said, not a binge drinker or an abusive, violent drunk; in fact he was quite cheerful when he drank, and never showed an outward drunkenness; he kept his job; he drank as another father might join a summer softball league and play right field: with perfunctory enthusiasm and lukewarm dedication; he was a good steady drinker and knew when to stop. When my sister and I went over to see him at the apartment, this at my mother’s urging, he did not seem especially grieved by the way things had turned out. He greeted us like a distant, unblooded relative: congenial, no kin to us.

Financially things immediately began to improve for us. My mother had always worked, as office manager for a law firm in the Simms Building

downtown, and my father had his same job, route man for a wholesale food distributor, only now he left checks that were deposited in our own accounts—for clothes, and college, and for the first time, ski lessons, judo lessons, trumpet lessons, there was money for that now. We had never known allowances so regular. For my father everything had become reductive and systematic. He had his pint bottles of flavored brandy, his efficiency on busy Lead Avenue, he knew where he stood and what he had to do. With my money I determined I would buy more beehives.

My mother was agreeable to this. Foremost in her mind was that I was like her, but that possibly there existed in me a recessive particle of latent indolence from my father that might kick in at any time, so any aspiration I had was given its full run. For my sister it was a completely different story. My mother believed that Sarah acquired her inclinations solely from her peers, that she always had some devious plot just simmering, and that a boy was the root cause. They spent many hours together in closed-door discussion.

That April I saw in the *Tribune* classifieds that a man had eight hives for sale, and I told my mother that I wanted to buy all of them. She called her brother to assist her in this. She had depended on Uncle Donal from the time of my father's moving out. He took an especial interest in me, because like her he saw me as a directionless, father-orphaned boy, but unlike her thought that it wasn't ambition I needed to be taught but baseball. There were Little League teams forming all over the city that spring and he thought it abhorrent that I showed no interest. He was disgusted that there was a diamond a block and a half away and I didn't make any effort to join the team there. One night at dinner at our house, with his wife and their three kids, he laid out the importance of baseball, the teamwork and self-reliance and trust that got built up among players.

"My father—your grandfather," he stressed the latter lest I fail to make the connection, "was the greatest semi-pro pitcher for the New England league in the six years he pitched. Doc Lonergan. They called him Doc because he was a lefthander. He kept the team together through some pretty lean times, 1932 through '38. When I was growing up people would tell me that Doc *was* the team. He would give you the shirt off his back. If the shortstop got hurt, he'd move to short and let the relief pitcher take over. It was always the team came first."

In this way my mother and her brother were the same. They huddled around sacrificial accomplishments in the family that were obviously amplified. But in my mind I was saying, If he was so good, why didn't the Red Sox call him up?

I went over to the diamond twice, to please him, to say I'd done it. I never liked the nonsense I had to endure, the put-downs and foul-mouthed tirades any new player has to shake off. I didn't have the patience to wait it out and be accepted. I didn't have the capacity to forgive those who hazed me, and with stunning clarity I saw that this attitude got in the way of me being able to play.

A conversation between my mother and Uncle Donal: "Donal, let's go this beekeeping route. He likes it and it's *something*, at least. He's not doing that well in school so maybe this hobby is what he needs." And I heard his reluctant assent.

"I think the guy was drunk," I told my uncle. "I couldn't understand very well what he was saying. He still has all the hives and wants \$25 apiece for them," and Donal whistled.

"But he's selling them with comb honey supers and sections and dividers, and full-depth supers with frames and foundation." I knew Donal wouldn't have the vaguest idea of what I was talking about, and this pleased me. "This is his name," and I showed the notepad. "Mike D-Z-U-L-A. How do you say that," and my uncle said, "I wouldn't even try."

Mike lived just south of what we called the Nob Hill area, a few blocks off Central. Small well-kept houses, a mix of adobe and pitched-roof styles. I knocked on the door and an old man answered, with a wild, feathered beard that reminded me of John Brown of Harper's Ferry fame. He wore wire glasses with round lenses the size of quarters and stems that hooked the back of his ears—the same kind John Lennon wore. I asked for Mike and stumbled over the last name, and he wordlessly held open the screen door for us. The front room was dark and hot, and the dusty, high-cushioned chairs and couch had a threadbare neatness to them. The old man went through the kitchen and out the back to get Mike, and my uncle and I looked at the religious paintings that covered the walls. The largest, dead center on the long interior wall, was of Christ holding a thorn-encrusted heart and rolling his dolorous eyes heavenward. "Roman Catholics," Uncle Donal said shaking his head, as if we weren't.

The old man came back inside through the kitchen into the front room, and stood and looked at us in bewilderment, making us understand that he was Mike Dzula.

“Bees outside,” he said and I looked to my uncle, who gave me a gentle push.

“Of course,” Uncle Donal whispered out of the side of his mouth, “how stupid of us.”

My uncle was a fleet salesman for a Dodge dealership up on Lomas Boulevard, and sometimes he gave me the impression that he couldn’t turn it off. As we approached the hives he asked Mike a barrage of questions, as though Mike were his customer and we were all walking the lot. Mike obliged. His accent hovered on unintelligible, but what I gathered was that he was Polish; he had been in the United States from the ’30s, but had lived somewhere else after he left Poland; his wife was dead; he was selling his hives and equipment because his health was failing; he was selling all but one hive; three hives he was selling for someone else.

The hives were set back in the corner of the yard in rows of two. A stand of leathery hollyhocks acted as a windbreak or backstop. Sunflowers grew up sporadically along the back fence. The grass had not been cut in months and was about knee deep. Mike took out a pocket knife and cut a cigar into small chunks then packed them into the bowl of an ancient ceramic pipe and lit it. Puffing, he went over to the hive entrance and exhaled a cloud, then lifted the cover and laid down a pencil-thin stream across the top bars. “This is where I bow out,” Uncle Donal said, and went up to the house. I dropped to one knee watching the old man move slowly and intentionally among his hives. Without using a hive tool he jiggled a frame loose and withdrew a brood comb and held it up—a gorgeous kaleidoscope of pollen, honey, and sealed worker brood. One-handedly he picked off the comb what I took to be the queen: he pinched her by the thorax and held her out to me, and I could see her legs madly struggling. Nimbly he replaced her. “Needs comb honey super,” he said. His moustache had overgrown his mouth, and when he spoke it was like ventriloquism, words coming from anywhere, from the dark entrances of the hives themselves.

“Aren’t you going to wear a veil at least?” I asked. Bees floated like sparkling dust motes, lighting on his shirt and pants and in his beard and hair. When I opened my hive, I wore both veil and gloves, and two long-sleeved shirts, and heavy pants tucked into my boots.

He ignored me and put the frame back in. "Little an-jels," he said indicating the ones circling his head. "Mike's little an-jels." To my uncle they were the furthest thing from angelic—he was out of the picture by now, back on the other side of the gate. "Get stunk?" Mike made a face *So what?* and went on to another hive, lifting a frame and displaying it to me then reinserting it.

"Mike," my uncle called, "we have to get going. I have to get to work." Mike threw his hands up and closed the hive, and they walked back down the drive to the car.

"I'll talk to his mother. We'll get back to you," Uncle Donal said.

Driving home he was ecstatic. "It's not the hives that's important," he told me. "It's what the old Polack *knows*. This is a great opportunity." He pulled onto a side street and parked the car. I could see him doing this with his customers and I disliked the overt theatricality. "You can buy bees anywhere anytime," he said as if I was the one who had to be persuaded, and laid an emphatic finger on the dash. "Pick the old guy's *brain*. Have him teach you everything there is to know about beekeeping.

"Do your homework," he said. "Find out how much hives go for new, how much bees cost. Then we'll make him an offer—a package deal, him *and* the hives."

I checked my catalogs, called the commercial beekeeper who had sold me my first hive. We drove back over to see Mike again. "He'll go for it," Uncle Donal said, "if the old coot has any savvy."

My uncle told him I would buy all his hives on an installment plan, as the checks from my father came in. We'd take possession after we'd paid for the last one. "In the meantime," Uncle Donal said, "the boy wants to come over on Saturday afternoons and learn beekeeping from you."

Mike considered this. He spoke in a slow, garbled tongue. I didn't know whether he was agreeing or not. My uncle understood him but I didn't; a phrase here and there was all I picked up. Uncle Donal flashed me an A-okay. I filled in a \$25 check as good faith, and we shook hands. As we got into the car, Mike came back out with the smallest jar of honey I had ever seen. My uncle held it up to the light, tracing the diamond-cut glass, then passed it to me.

"Thanks, Mike," my uncle said, and then as we drove away, "Think he could spare it?"

On Saturday afternoons Uncle Donal picked me up and took me over to Mike's. The understanding was that I had to stay at least four hours before I called him, and then he would get away from the dealership and drive me back home.

I spent my time not working the bees but in Mike's small detached garage making new frames and wiring and embedding foundation. A background smell of musty combs was overwhelming. The one lightbulb hanging down depressed me—it reminded me of an interrogation chamber on TV; from the bare studs hung dusty, rippled pictures, framed but unglassed, of JFK and Pope Somebody the Some-teenth. I wanted to be outside learning how to make honeybees do what you wanted them to. This was what my uncle meant when he wanted me to pick the old beekeeper's brain?

He threw away nothing: it was repaired, rendered, or dismantled for component parts. Frames habitually get the worst abuse in the apiary, and he had stacks to work on, rainy-day work. If wax moths had gotten to a comb, he cut out the unravaged part to be melted down and kept the wormy frame as salvage. If a top bar had been broken he chiseled out the piece and shaped another from scrap sheet metal on his clunky vice. His way was labor intensive, as we say today. I was impatient with it. Mike had forever; I was twelve, and didn't have forever. Those Saturdays were hell on me.

While he revived old frames I made new ones. I began by inserting and punching tin eyelets, four in each end bar, then nailed on the top and bottom bars with a slick-handled tack hammer. Next I fit the frame into a rig of blocks that kept it square, strung four rows of gauge 30 wire from a pegged spool, and tightened the wire and clinched it with a small nail. Embedding wax was next. I especially liked handling sheets of foundation, its heady usefulness and translucent potential, the tang of milled beeswax, the imprint of hexagons—embedding it was my downfall. Plain beeswax foundation typically comes in a three-ply sheet and needs support. In hot weather with rough handling, or when put through the stress of an extractor, the comb will break down. Wiring it kept it in place and was the thing I did badly.

After inserting the foundation under the top bar and nailing the wedge in, I embedded the wire into the wax using a spur embedder. Like old-time pressing irons pioneer women used to use, one sat in a can of hot water on a small hotplate while the other was employed.

But I had a heavy touch. Oftentimes Mike, in his exasperation, held the frame up in front of me showing me where the wires had melted through the wax, where I held the spur too hard, too long, too much in a hurry to get it done. That I hadn't done a good job was obvious, the wax neatly dangling from the wire, his tossing the frame aside. "Not wort' a chickenshit," he said to me pressing a lacquer-colored thumbnail to the tip of his little finger, in case I hadn't grasped how insignificant chickenshit was.

But I had done my homework—I was just a kid of twelve, coming thirteen, but I knew. I had catalogs from every major beekeeping supplier on the continent, A.G. Woodman, Walter T. Kelley, A.I. Root, the Dadants, catalogs I had committed to memory; much better ways of putting foundation in frames existed; a much better way for *everything* existed. I began to nurse hard feelings against the old man, his archaic habits and unintelligible words, and decided once and for all that his brain wasn't worth picking. He had told me once that the best way to capture a swarm was to go to the grocery and get a cartoon box and put the swarm inside and close the flaps: a cartoon box, I couldn't figure out *cartoon*. Cap'n Crunch? Coco Puffs? A swarm couldn't fit in a cereal box. Years later, walking down an aisle where boxes of lettuce were being stocked, I understood. Carton.

But at the time, cartoon was right, it was a joke the way Mike wired his frames. You could buy crimp-wired foundation, the wires already embedded, from the factory; there was even a stronger plastic-based foundation, and foundation with metal side supports. All you had to do was slip the sheet into a slotted top bar and nail on the bottom bar. It cost more but you didn't spend all your time inside doing penance on a Saturday afternoon. All you had to do was skim a few catalogs and you saw the better way.

## II

I was a boy looking for some connection and honeybees narrowed the gap. *National Geographic* was the medium, a publication never intended to be read but flicked through, glossy picture by picture, in waiting rooms by ailing patients with short, pain- and fever-induced attention spans. The magazine had a profoundly different impact on me. In 1967, my fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Julian, kept a clandestine box of them up on the top shelf of



the cloakroom—back issues given her by an innocent-minded neighbor as instructional aides. Instead, they became a source of contention between Mrs. Julian and us boys, who gleefully, joyfully hunted after pictures of bare-breasted and penile-sheathed natives of Cameroon and New Guinea. Normally a boundlessly cheerful woman who urged her pupils to explore their curiosities to the fullest, she turned hostile when she'd hear our suggestive, raucous laughter. As dour censor, she let out one issue at a time, after she had previewed it.

In her absence one day we broke into the stash, and it was in an unclassified issue that I found the pictures that would continue to hold me in thrall: here was a honeybee worker, magnified thirty-two times, sucking nectar from a flower; here a monstrous drone feasting his way out of a capped cell; here a forager coated with grains of pollen, captured mid-beat over a stamen.

Here too was high drama that through all its meaninglessness demanded a closer look: Queens fighting to the death; a guard driving her barbed stinger into human flesh, disemboweling herself in return; a field bee's apoplexy that precisely gave the coordinates of a rich nectar source. Just in the background was the beekeeper, effaced, almost invisible (yet stings realized him), patient, long-suffering, conducting a symphony of insect activities. What he gave he took back, providing combs and hive, then harvesting their harvest. And bees tolerated his benign interference. At ten years old I began reading into the photographs my own voracious need for information, for some fixed point in my life from which I could then proceed. I found this primary document, this Rosetta stone if you will, in the beekeeper's glass-walled observation hive, where honeybees obligingly clustered on one comb, exposing their private, primordial selves to his scrutiny and interpretation. The implication, corroborated in Kodachrome, was that everything had been tantalizingly worked out between man and insect: I was drawn into the orderliness, and wanted it for myself.

I had to get some beehives.

My father's inclination was to wait and see if I outgrew my unnatural fixation; my mother saw first stirrings of ambition and fed it.

I began with one colony that next spring, a swarm hived by a north valley commercial beekeeper I had tracked down in the Albuquerque phone book. He sold me the basics—veil, pith helmet, smoker, hive tool, comb honey super. Also *First Lessons in Beekeeping* by C.P. Dadant. At 127 pages

it was the literary and visual opposite of *National Geographic*. Few pictures, most grainy and washed-out, none in color, with bland captions: “As the lid is raised a few puffs of smoke are desirable”; “Ordinary friction top pail, showing perforated lid for feeding”; “A typical western apiary arranged in rows.” I wouldn’t read it, of course. But my colony was doing strange things—the practice flights of new field bees that I mistook for swarming sent me into fits; when they aired themselves on the entrance board at night, an ominous blanket of grapes, I had nightmares. My greatest fear was that I wasn’t doing something right, and they would recognize my gross ignorance and abscond. When I called the beekeeper with questions, his wife usually told me he and his son were out working their apiaries across the state. Sometimes they returned my call, a month later. I was on my own.

Still I resisted the primer because it diminished that initial pictorial exhilaration of magnification and color. More to my shame, at ten years old I still relied on pictures instead of words, hence my joy with full-page graphics. Reading . . . reading was an artificial stumbling I did. Somewhere the circuitry was bad: on a line of text, I never knew where, my eye flittered, my retina stuttered. I understood what I read, but I only read a fraction of what was on the page. What I retained didn’t make sense. To read was to make a habit of failure.

Learning disability, the reading specialist said; moderate to severe dyslexia, the neurologist said; moderate, my mother said. There were others with conditions much worse than mine; I shouldn’t (and wouldn’t) complain. A friend of my mother’s suggested a lazy eye; I bristled at the word. I saw and observed all right, so it was never my problem, I reasoned, I was not the one at fault. Even the congenial reading specialist was an enemy, if only for her message. Who disabled? I could hold a pencil or read a sign. A dyslexic sees the world in fragments, but only if he is made to read. *Moderate*, my mother kept reminding. By using the exercises—if only I would—with the continued help of the reading teacher, I could surmount this and all other problems. Whatever I wanted to do I could do.

I had two things against me: a cultivated stubbornness, a nurtured deficiency. School lessons were always easily shunted, but this was different: my bees were at stake; I had to get more information. *First Lessons in Beekeeping* it was—I read grudgingly, the way a person who has misassembled something will now turn to the printed directions. I stumbled

over the page, onto the next. If my eye tripped, I let it trip, encouraged it to trip, even on the other parts of the sentence where it didn't trip. I kept pitching forward; and rereading and rereading, ingraining, memorizing what wasn't coming, sometimes deliberately blurring the page, then refocusing, and by the fourth or fifth gloss I began to get an idea.

I habitually took it into the bathtub for my long soaks where inevitably it got immersed; in my room, hunched over a small noisy coil heater, I read a wet page then held it open to the heater's weak push of warmth. Over time the text became stiff, the paper crinkling, the cut edges so thumbled they softened and became depressed like the tab indices of a dictionary. The front cover wore out and off. I read it the way you squeeze a rubber ball to strengthen a weak grip; I worried it the way you worry a slick, malformed stone.

Under "Spring in the Apiary":

We have mentioned the uniting of worthless colonies with others. The newspaper method devised by Dr. C.C. Miller is a very practical one. After smoking the bees of the colony to be united with the weak one, the top and honey board are removed, exposing the frames. These frames are then completely covered by a sheet of newspaper and the weak colony, without its bottom board, is placed immediately on top of the paper. If everything is made tight above the paper the bees in the upper hive cannot get out unless they gnaw through the paper and go down and out through the lower hive. As the bees above gnaw the paper gradually, they have time to become acquainted with those below, with a minimum of fighting and destruction, for bees readily recognize strange interlopers and resent them.

I would never have noticed the faulty construction of the third sentence. It was the pragmatic high style that held me, suggestive that hard work was needed to access it. Still I would not take it in its entirety. Skittering over the page, I commended certain phrases, like signs on exit and entrance ramps, to memory. I was particularly drawn to *minimum of fighting and destruction* and *readily recognize strange interlopers* and *resent*: the reverberation of this beautiful noise made a deeper level of beekeeping come available to me, for I knew these phrases, felt them; they became another fixed point in

my new endeavor, the glass-walled hive, its inner heart made visible, but now spun out in words, in story.

Even more: bees gnaw. I would not have thought this right. I went back to my Kodachrome photographs and looked at the glazed velvety tongue magnified thirty times and thought that I was in the midst of some wondrous new phase of my life: bees *gnaw*.

My intense reading sessions I would not keep at for more than a few minutes. Perhaps I compounded the problem, refusing to practice the exercises I was supposed to, and employed my own flash method, roaming the page, hoarding fragments of meaning, making no logical sense of the whole, hurrying, hurrying, learning the world by rote.

A decade later, in 1978, I was collecting everything published on honeybees: ephemera and fortnightlies and occasional publications I found at flea markets; "Bee World" and "The Scottish Beekeeper" and "The Beekeeper's Exchange"; bulletins and circulars from the Bureau of Entomology, USDA, and from the Department of Agriculture, Dominion of Canada; pamphlets and notes from the Royal Horticultural Society. I became a frequenter of antiquarian bookshops, and made periodic visits to keep searchers vigilant, in Denver and Chicago and Fort Worth and Seattle and L.A., and corresponded with countless others. I was Bee Man. "Dear Bee Man: We have found an odd little volume you might find interesting . . ."

I became a bonafide collector when I acquired bound facsimiles: the 1637 compendium *Discourse or historie of bees* by Richard Remnant, and the Reverend Charles Butler's *The Feminine monarchy, or A treatise concerning bees*, (1609). Other gems followed, originals or reprints, or even mimeographs, if I was desperate enough:

*A description of a bee-house, useful for the swarming of bees*, Sir William Thomson, 1673;

*Instructions for managing bees*, The Dublin Society, 1733;

*The true amazons: or, The monarchy of bees. Being a new discovery and improvement of those wonderful creatures*, Joseph Warder, 1742 edition;

*The practical bee-master*, Robert Maxwell, 1747;

*Collateral bee-boxes, or a new easy and advantageous method of*

*managing bees*, Reverend Stephen White, 1759;  
*Proper directions how to manage bees*, Richard Hoy, 1788.

In the nineteenth century the shift was toward the hobbyist, the backlotter, the cottager:

*The cottager's manual for the management of his bees, for every month of the year; both on the suffocating and depriving system*, Robert Huish, 1820;

*The apiarian's manual, containing all that is important in the natural history of bees, or useful in their practical management*, T.M. Howatson, 1827;

*The management of bees: with a description of the "Ladies' Safety Hive,"* Samuel Bagster, jun., 1834;

*The queen bee, or a fete to the blossoms*, M.A. Ward, 1839;

*The cottager's bee book*, Richard Smith, 1839;

*My bee book*, William Cotton, 1842;

in *The Cottager's Monthly Visitor*, "The cottage bee-hive: a letter to cottagers, showing a pleasant, profitable and humane method of keeping bees," by "a beekeeper," undated [ca. 1842].

Others attracted me for their curiosities of style or illustrations, or merely because they had uncut pages:

*Lessons derived from the animal world. The bee as an example of economy.* Charles and Sarah Tomlinson, 1846 (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge);

Wheeler's *The apiarian's directory*, 1847;

*The shilling bee book*, Robert Golding, 1847;

*Apis Mellifica, or the poison of the honey-bee considered as a therapeutic agent*, C.W. Wolf, 1858;

*The book of home pets*, published in parts, Samuel Orchard Beeton, 1861–62;

*To beekeepers . . . a few plain directions how to take honey without killing the bees*, by a beekeeper, 1873;

*Dzierzon's rational bee-keeping*, Johann Dzierzon, 1882;

*Foulbrood: its origin, development, and cure*, A.R. Kohnke, 1882;

*A year among bees*, C.C. Miller, 1886;  
*Stepping stones to beekeeping*, J.M. Gillies, 1895;  
*Don'ts and whys of beekeeping*, G.C. Dunn, 1906.

The collection went on, but these were the heart of it.

In place of bees I now kept beekeepers. My first year of college I had sold off my entire stock, nearly fifty hives, in three or four apiaries in the north and south Rio Grande valley. Suiting up and cracking open hives didn't fit my schedule anymore. My entire freshman year, outside of class, I spent off and on pursuing a golden-haired rancher's daughter from Artesia. I still was not any great reader, the university had accepted me conditionally.

I read not for practical beekeeping advice but for the enviable transformation the authors made of themselves in becoming and being beekeepers. Their primers and hornbooks were justification enough: unrequited Audubons, noting and sketching every tendency of their subject; would-be Pepyses who sought to capture the sport in turgid, versified prose; Pasteurs whose minds were not prepared and whom chance would not favor; tinkerers who saw their hives as brimming laboratories.

Their instruction went to some untouched level in me, a shared odd conception. The more sprung or musty the edition the better, the more strange a turn of phrase, the more prescriptive and doctrinaire the author and immutable his process, the better. It was the glass-walled hive again, the guise revealed, the inner impulse laid out. Not so easy a thing to be Beekeeper, simply to put on the tulle veil and stingproof gloves. That was attachment. The true dressing, the real costume was to see yourself in relationship to bees, to have some connection, a theory to explain it, however crackpot. It was a living batch I clung to; the accumulation of brittle, pedantic volumes and outdated tracts became the dictionaries I looked myself up in.

There is a seminal work that any beekeeper must know if he reads very far, for it is the fountainhead of modern practical beekeeping. *Langstroth on the Hive and the Honey-bee*, by Reverend Lorenzo L. Langstroth. Finally I got hold of an 1853 edition, a reading copy, not the original cover, foxed pages, unstable binding—I paid something over \$100, and was happy to do it. On the frontispiece things conspired against seriousness—the androgynous picture of the Reverend bore an uncanny resemblance to Jonathan Winters

dressed up as one of his characters, Maude E. Frickert: white longish hair combed straight back, a pair of bifocal granny glasses fixed halfway down the bridge of his nose.

It was space, a way of using space, that Langstroth stumbled onto: 1/4 to 3/8 inch of dead air. This is the tolerance that bees will not alter. Bee space. If they have less they will close off the space with propolis, a resinous substance from budding trees; if they have more they will fill out the space with burr comb.

From this discovery Langstroth patented his moveable-frame hive, and without moveable frames, bees are unmanageable. Before this development the beekeeper was not beekeeper; the bees, nesting in skeps and log gums and attaching combs at any angle, kept him. Actually neither party prospered. The beekeeper literally had to tear the colony apart to extract honey or inspect the brood. There was no economy or standardization.

Nailing hives and assembling frames in Mike's garage that spring and summer of 1969, I had not the faintest inkling of bee space, had mentally blocked reference to it in my one and only *First Lessons in Beekeeping*. Like Mike's arcane way of doing things it had no direct application to my life. I had only vague promises I kept making to myself: when the time came for me to have my own bee operation, I wouldn't do it in an airless glare-or-shadow garage, with martyred presidents and uncertain religious personages scrutinizing my work product. I promised myself it would be a long spacious warehouse with rows of metal shelving and wide aisles, and skylights. Clean light pure light. That was what kept despair back as I labored on for Mike. On the other hand I relished the repetitious, day-dreamy tasks, and the feel and smell of the fresh-cut pine wood and beeswax foundation. I liked the heft of a properly embedded frame; I liked the supers with their functional rabbets and interconnected dovetail corners; I liked the frames nestled against each other, the solid emptiness of the hive bodies, knowing as I touched and assembled and stacked them they would soon be mine, soon.

### III

That July, less than a year after my father had moved out, I told my mother that I wanted to ride my bike over to the apartment to visit him, by myself. Up to this time he came to visit us, monthly. The dishes would be rinsed

and stacked, the living room vacuumed, and then he arrived, as if home from a weekend trip. My mother left the room at some point, ostensibly to put clothes into the dryer or fold clothes, but in truth to let my sister and me speak personally to him. But we never talked about anything we wouldn't have said in her presence.

When I told her that I wanted to go visit him alone at his apartment, she was initially against it. She probably suspected some subterfuge—some argument made against her now long-standing decision to have him move out—easier said and discussed out of the house, that would gain momentum. If my mother was good at anything, she was expert at cutting something off at the source before it got out of control.

But she acquiesced. Before I rode off, she called me up to the porch.

"Might I remind you," she said, "that fathers play baseball with their sons, fathers take their sons camping, fathers meet their sons' teacher. Fathers show an interest in their sons' growth and development. No father you had ever did that."

I listened to this, knowing she was right. At first I had resisted her comments about him, wanting to withhold a part of myself from their discord; or maybe I hadn't wanted to hear reasons about something I knew was mostly true. But now I had to admit that after moving out he hadn't displayed much interest in either me or my sister, but merely showed up at the appointed time, leaving a check on the dining table as if making payments on something far in arrears.

His efficiency was on the fringes of the university ghetto, but across Girard, where homeowners lived, and so seemed a kind of respectable, if stripped down, existence. He was expecting me and let me in, and we went and sat at a dinette with a yellow-specked formica top. Sitting across from him I wanted him to say something, but when I looked at him he glanced away.

He had made an attempt to spruce up the room since the last time my sister and I were there. An African violet on a milk crate; a Remington print, *Dismounted, the Fourth Troopers Moving*, riders and horses floating mid-air, tacked to one wall. A fairly nice hide-a-bed couch, two matching chairs—but the place had come furnished with these. On the kitchen table sat a pair of nickel salt and pepper shakers with dented caps. I grabbed one and began fiddling with it.



He asked about school. I told him that I was spending Saturday afternoons with the old beekeeper who was going to sell me his hives.

"That's good," he said. "And your mother?—she's okay with letting you put that many hives in the back yard?"

"She wants me to," I told him. "In fact she had to convince Uncle Donal to let me take all of them. I'll have nine altogether. I've got the stands already made."

He seemed satisfied with this. That was what separated my father from all the other adults I knew: he rarely contradicted or corrected me. Neither would he have seen the point of picking Mike's brain, as my uncle so enthusiastically had encouraged me to do.

The small, humped refrigerator started humming, and he turned around and looked at it. "You want something to drink," he said, "a Coke?" I shook my head. There was a long pause. He said, "She doesn't think I'm worth much. But she forgets." He looked up at me. "I gave her two beautiful kids. Remind her of that the next time she starts in."

"Sure," I said. I knew if I let the silence hang there long enough he would go on to something else we could talk about.

"So Donal takes you to the beekeeper's house," he said. "How do they get along?"

"He doesn't stay," I said. "He leaves, and then when I'm ready I call, and he comes and gets me."

My father nodded. "You're doing okay," he said, more for himself than me.

On the day Uncle Donal and I were to pick up the hives, I rose early and watered down the hive stands, just for something to do, then spent the rest of the day anticipating dusk. Mike hadn't wanted to sell the hives without getting the state bee inspector's certification, but I had talked him out of it, in a hurry as I was to get my bees under my supervision and the better management I knew I could provide.

At twilight Uncle Donal drove up towing a small, open U-Haul trailer, and we went over to Mike's. In the dark, with my uncle holding the flashlight, Mike and I nailed the entrance cleats shut. Some of the hives already had two supers on them, and Uncle Donal and I strained to get them in the trailer. Mike urged us to get home and open up the hives as

quickly as possible. I handed him the check. Characteristically he went inside without a word.

A month later, the state bee inspector called to make an appointment. He parked in front of the house, suited up, fired his smoker, and lost no time telling me my bees had *Bacillus larvae*, American Foulbrood. Touching an affected cell with a twig he strung the larva like ropy, brown snot across the comb. Every hive had it, some not as bad.

“No telling where you got it,” he said. It could have been from the wild swarm the commercial beekeeper sold me, from Mike’s hives, or his friend’s three that were mixed in. Also I had interchanged frames among all the hives, putting full brood frames into weaker hives—as I had read to do—in the month I had them, thus infecting the entire apiary. Langstroth’s invention made the transmission of AFB all the easier.

I liked him. His movements were intentional like Mike’s, but he made conversation with me like a doctor whose warmth and offhandedness puts you at ease, though underneath it all you know you have a devastating illness. He fed burlap tatters into the smoker, worked the bellows, moved quickly to the next diseased colony. This was the beekeeper I wanted to be like, the one I could learn from.

He told me about sulphathiazole, available from any beekeeping supplier, but warned me it was more preventative than cure; and I saw in the way he glanced up from a hive, heard in his soothing, relentless words, that he was trying to soften that I would have to destroy my bees. At twelve I saw it and accepted it. On the brink of losing something entirely mine, I did something adult, what I wanted to say was adult: called him by his first name, risking being a smart-mouthed kid. But he wasn’t fazed at all. If the sulpha doesn’t work, he told me, this is what you have to do. Close up the whole hive. Don’t leave even a crack open: pour calcium cyanide—again, the bee suppliers carried it—in the entrance, and close it up. The gas would work quickly. Incinerate the wax and frames. The hives and supers might be saved. Char the inside, every square inch, with a propane torch—be sure and scorch the corners and rabbets especially well. Again, I could try sulpha, he said stapling red tags to my hives, but I had to be prepared to gas them. He’d drive up again from Las Cruces to reinspect in a couple of months or so, if I decided to use the drug.

But just as I was in a hurry to get them to my backyard from Mike’s, I was as much in a hurry to kill them off. When he called again, I told him

that my bees were dead and gone, that I had gutted and scorched the hives and supers and stacked them against the back wall of our shed—a dangerously haphazard pile, gleaming white and empty like so many skulls.

If this were an orderly world, Mike Dzula would have filled me with bee wisdom I could never have gleaned from catalogs and books, and the state bee inspector would have been a meddling government proxy come to doom my bees. In a world without paradox, my father would never have had to leave for us to live a better life. I went over to tell him, the night I closed up my hives, that I was like him, that I now realized he was lazy and I was impatient, and that impatience was a kind of laziness. I coasted down the gully of Girard, then fought the long pull of the hill, my lungs aching, to knock at his door, 9:30 at night. After a long time he answered—he was not expecting me and was undeniably, incoherently drunk, a condition I had never seen him in. He let me in and we went back to the small dinette where we sat facing each other, to bargain somehow, to square things between us; and his breath and the room were suffused with the sweetness of his brandy, whether apricot or peach or cherry or blackberry, I truly couldn't say.